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ABSTRACT

Notes on evaluating the effectiveness of literacy programs are presented in outline form. An introductory section proposes that alternative assessment approaches focus primarily on providing meaningful feedback to learners and teachers and are useful in improving teaching. Part I addresses assessment of change in student literacy practices outside the school context and offers a series of evaluation tasks for identifying prior literacy experiences, developing intake measures for that process, developing instructional activities and assessment measures for changes in literacy behavior, reducing barriers, promoting program participation, enhancing social action, and quantifying program success. A list of outcomes that can be linked to literacy education is also provided. Part II discusses the assessment of instructional success, and offers evaluation tasks for documenting progress in changing student perceptions of the reading and writing process, getting meaning from print, moving along the literacy continuum, increasing knowledge and confidence and social interaction skill development, and pinpointing problem areas. A final section addresses program priority-setting. Appended notes contain examples of both global and print-based reading and writing strategies, with questions to use in guiding student understanding. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DOCUMENTING PROGRESS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

by

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INTRODUCTION:

Assessment and evaluation can be used for

1. accountability of individual projects

2. comparison across projects

3. feedback to students and teachers; improvement of curriculum and instruction

While alternative assessment approaches recognize the need for accountability and comparison, they focus primarily on evaluation measures that provide meaningful information to learners and teachers and are useful in improving teaching.

PART I: DOCUMENTING CHANGE IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL CONTEXTS

A. Linking Assessment to Program Goals

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Discussion:

* What are the overall goals of the Family English Literacy projects?

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* What are the goals of individual family literacy projects?

* How do learner goals (personal, educational, vocational) fit into this framework?

B. Linking Literacy Experience With Assessment:

Alternative assessment assumes that adults have varied experiences with print and have established literacy practices that are used in the home, in the community, in educational institutions and at work as well as in their interactions with their children's school(s). Non-literate adults or those new to literacy generally have coping skills and a social network that help them to deal with unfamiliar print. The literacy experiences of the learners (negative and positive, past and present) should be reflected in initial assessment, instruction, and the evaluation of learners' progress.

EVALUATION TASKS:

1. Identifying Learners' Prior Experiences With Reading and Writing and Documenting Current Literacy Practices

What do you know about the literacy experiences and practices of the learners who participate in your projects? Given the context of your own project:

a. What experiences do learners have with literacy in school, in their communities, at work and at home? (first language and English)

b. What background knowledge do learners have about the school system? What experience have they had with their children's schooling?

c. What social networks and coping skills do learners use to deal with literacy demands that are "above their heads?"

d. What barriers are in place that keep learners from being more effective in their reading and writing and in their interactions with the U.S. school system?

2. Developing Intake Measures that help identify prior experiences and current practices:

Given your project what measures have you used or could you use to find out what experiences learners have, what background knowledge they possess, and what coping strategies they employ to deal with difficult literacy tasks? How can you find out more about barriers they face?

(SEE MORNING DISCUSSION ON INTAKE)

3. Developing instructional activities that broaden the range of literacy experiences

What opportunities can your program provide for learners so that they can broaden their range of literacy experiences (read and write more, read and write different things, interact with their kids using literacy, depend less on outside help, feel more capable in their interactions with print, have greater confidence in their ability to deal with the school system)?

List activities that you do provide or could provide to support and enhance literacy practices in the home, in the community, in academic institutions, at the work site, and in home-school interactions:

a. at home:

b. in interactions with the English speaking community:

c. in employment related training and at the work site

d. in school/home interactions:

4. Developing assessment measures to document changes in literacy behavior in out-of-school settings; collecting data that shows changes in parents' lives that can be linked to literacy education

How can you show that there has been a change in the out-of-school literacy practices of the learners?

5. Developing a program design and support services that reduce barriers, promote participation and enhance social interaction

What support services can you provide to reduce barriers to program participation, and promote greater literacy interactions within the family and within family-school contexts?

6. Summative Evaluation that Shows Program Success in Affecting Change in Out-of-School Contexts

What measures have you instituted or could you institute to show that you are successful in enhancing learners' experience with literacy, extending positive coping skills, increasing background knowledge about systems and services, and building the learners' confidence in being able to meet their personal, educational, and vocational goals.

Examples of Outcomes that Can Be Linked to Literacy Education

Evidence may show that learners

* transfer to mainstream ESL, vocational programs, or training programs.
* show increased interest in educational or occupational opportunities, in the schooling of their children, and in functions and activities at work.
* make greater use of community services.
* return to the program as teachers, community outreach workers, or bilingual aides.
* seek to gain control over their lives and make significant contributions to their communities.
* are more promotable or qualify for further education and training.
* have greater confidence in their ability to understand and use literacy, communicate their ideas, solve problems, work with others, and effect change.
* are more confident and participate more often in group discussions about problem solving.
* have developed skills and strategies that will take them beyond the limits of the program.

From Theory to Practice:

What measures could your program use to collect similar kinds of evidence?

PART II: ASSESSING INSTRUCTIONAL SUCCESS: DOCUMENTING PROGRESS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Alternative assessment perceives reading and writing as related activities that require experience, background knowledge, and language proficiency. To become independent readers and writers, learners must develop strategies for interacting with print. Learners who see reading and writing as a purely mechanical process (i.e., equating reading with knowing the alphabet and recognizing words; and seeing writing largely as copying and spelling) may need help in broadening their view of literacy.

Those learners who are still in the initial stages of literacy development need to develop strategies for linking top-down skills (getting meaning from context) and bottom-up skills (linking letters and sounds, recognizing word shapes. Those learners who are limited speakers of English need to develop their oral language proficiency along with their literacy skills.

Alternative assessment tends to focus on evaluation of the following:

* the perceptions that learners bring to the reading and writing process

* the strategies learners use to derive meaning from print (reading) and to express meaning in print (writing);

* the literacy skills that learners have acquired to help them understand the link between meaning and words on the page; the motor skills that are necessary to track words across the page and write effectively with a pen or pencil (important in initial literacy)

* the experience and background knowledge that learners use to understand U.S. systems, services, institutions and cultural practices

* the language proficiency in English learners are developing to help them understand the relationship between the meaning of a text and the grammatical structures and the vocabulary of a text.

* the confidence and social interaction skills the learner employs to deal face-to-face with English speakers

EVALUATION TASKS: Developing Measures to Document Progress in Language Learning and Literacy Development; Implementing Alternative Approaches to Literacy

1. Perceptions of the Reading and Writing Process/Changes in Attitudes towards Literacy

What measures are you using or could you use to determine how learners perceive the reading and writing process? How do they view the reading and writing development of their children? How do they see their own role in the process? How could you show change in their perception of what constitutes reading and writing?

2. Getting Meaning from Print/ Developing Effective Strategies

What measures are you using or could you use to observe and document the strategies that learners are using to make sense of printed materials? (see also Primary Language Record)

3. Demonstrating Movement Along the Literacy Continuum

a. Initial Literacy

What measures could you use to determine whether learners are at the very beginning of the literacy continuum? How can you tell whether they are literate in the primary language? How can you tell whether a learner has "the idea" of what print is and how it is used? How can you tell how much or how little a learner can read or write? How can you show progress?

b. Beginning and Basic Literacy

What measures could you use to show that learners are reading and writing more and using the language with greater ease? How can you document that learners are getting better laying out a text (writing in a straight line, using titles and drawings) and are moving towards standard conventions (spelling, punctuation, grammar)

What measures could you use to document that learners are becoming familiar with a greater range of text types (labels, signs, letters, official documents, language experience stories, articles, books, poems) How can you show that learners are deepening their responses to texts (asking questions, challenging facts and assumptions, formulating responses)

4. Prior Knowledge/Documenting Increase in Knowledge

How can you tell whether learners know how the school system works? Whether they know how to access essential services? What the expectations of teachers are? What references to Halloween or Thanksgiving mean? How can you show progress?

How can you show that learners are starting to make links between their own lives and the texts they read and write? How can you show that learners are moving from personal experience to more global issues (from "my experience as a parent" to "the rights and responsibilities of parents in U.S. schools).

5. Knowledge Acquisition, Language Learning and Literacy Development/Pinpointing Problem Areas

How can you tell whether a learner's difficulty with reading and writing stem from weaknesses in literacy, from a lack of language proficiency, or from insufficient background knowledge with the content or format of the material? How can you show that learners are progressing in a) general language proficiency, b) reading and writing development, c) knowledge of systems, services, institutions, and cultural practices?

6. Confidence and Social Interaction Skills

How can you tell whether a learner has the confidence and the social interaction skills necessary to deal effectively with the school system, social service agencies, or with employers? How can you tell whether a student can use the language effectively to give information or express ideas effectively in writing? What measures could you use to document progress?

III. SETTING PRIORITIES

Given the context of your program (goals, learners, teachers) what areas do you want to focus on? What assessment approaches make sense in these areas?

EXAMPLES OF READING AND WRITING STRATEGIES

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Global (top down, mind-to-page) strategies help learners to use context, background knowledge and personal experience to make decisions about print; print-based (bottom-up, print to mind) strategies help learners to focus on words, letters, and structures.

Examples:

1. **Using "one's knowledge of the world" to understand the function of a "text"**

   Questions: What is this? a bill, a letter, a report card, an eviction notice, a newspaper article a children's book, a poem) What am I supposed to do with this? respond, ignore, enjoy (alone, share with others? worry, ask for help, ask for clarification

2. **Accessing the information in the text through predicting, confirming, and revising first impressions) (Context: Getting a notice from the school)**

   Questions: Where did this come from? What are they telling me, what is the point of this? Should I do something now? Will I get in trouble if I don't do something. Are there dates that I should pay attention to?

3. **Using knowledge of language and literacy to make sense of a text**

   What do the key words mean? Can I say them? Can I guess? Can I look them up? Can I ask somebody?

4. **Combining knowledge of language, literacy and numeracy to deal with computation**

   What should I do with the numbers in the text? Interpret/ Understand? Add, subtract, multiply? Why? What will happen if I do it wrong?

5. **Using "text aids" (graphics and pictures) to get meaning from a text**

   What are the pictures telling me? What do the graphs mean? What is the connection between the words and the pictures?

6. Using one's mind and one's feelings to respond to a "text" (Context: Seeing a letter in the paper)

Do I want to give an opinion, provide information, discuss the text?
Do I need to provide information to set someone straight?

7. Producing a text

a. Deciding what to say, to whom and why:

What do I want to say? Why? Who will read this? What do they want to know?

What format do I want to use (write a letter, write a note, fill out a form?)

b. Getting ideas down on paper (while writing a first draft)

How do I want to start? How do I want to say things? How should I finish?

c. Getting feedback

How do I like what I have written? Who(m) should I show this to? What questions should I ask them?

d. Revising

What do I want to change? What do I want to add? What do I want to take out?

e. Editing

Am I happy with my writing? How can I polish it? What spelling do I want to check? What sentences don't sound right? What help do I need?

f. Publishing

Who(m) should I send this to? Who(m) can I share this with?